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## Biographical Experiences of Post-Socialist Transformation in Corporate Business: Doing the Neoliberal Path

**Abstract** The neoliberal order, introduced in Poland in the course of post-socialist transformation, constituted a context of action, as well as a repertoire of rules and practices people becoming corporate managers had to learn to cope with. As some took it for granted as 'the only' way of joining the economies of the idealised 'West', and through their daily practices of efficiency and profit-maximisation, they were actually doing the neoliberalism; others, maintaining the distance towards the new world of 'freedom and opportunity' managed to develop a more critical stand. These were not actively doing neoliberalism, but merely making do with it, taking it strategically or even instrumentally. In the paper, the role of biographical work and biographical knowledge is analysed in the process of distancing, which enables monitoring and negotiations of the relations between the acting self and the neoliberal context of action.

**Keywords** Post-Socialist Transformation, Biography, Biographical Work, Neoliberalism, Corporate Business

The post-socialist transformation in the business field in Poland meant an introduction of a neoliberal program, which soon became a hegemonic discourse and a new faith. Taken uncritically or

even unreflexively by economists (with the exception of Kowalik and a few others) and a great majority of sociologists, the new program was sent to Polish society as a 'natural' and 'the only' way to catch up with Europe and the rest of the developed world. In the name of civilisation, progress and rationality, the new patterns of power and privilege were established, including some and excluding the rest. Their arbitrariness was masked with the supposedly scientific description of reality based on the principles of management techniques, as well as precise measuring and modelling of market forces. As there exist diverse (even contradictory) economic paradigms and different varieties of capitalism, the choice between various models is based not on scientific but ideological premises. It is a matter of faith. In fact,

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the choice of the neoliberal path together with the intensity, obtrusiveness and taken-for-grantedness of the neoliberal discourse reminded some anthropologists of a proselytising religion that had to be spread among infidels (Buchowski 2013); the religion with its missionaries and prophets (Kostera 1995), converts, true believers, cynics and masses of followers unaware of the costs involved.

I use the term neoliberalism here in a sense of an ideology, a mode of governance and a policy package following a belief in the power of 'self-regulating' free market (Steger and Roy 2010). 'The less state, the better' was the slogan of Polish post-socialist transformation, which was put into practice through deregulation of the economy, liberalisation of trade and industry, as well as privatisation of state-owned enterprises. Hand in hand with those macro-processes, a new model of social being was created: a self-interested, profit-maximising and entrepreneurial, embodying the neoliberal principles of freedom, opportunity and hard work. At the beginning of the 1990s, there were hundreds of conferences organised on transition to democracy and post-communist transformation. This reflection turned out to be idle (Król 2015) as in the end no other scenario was as powerful as a top-down neoliberal project. Poland, at that time, was admired and for some time it was thought that somehow the myth of *Solidarność* would have been applied in the reform plans. This did not happen. Instead, we saw the imposition of neoliberalism as a new system of meaning, a 'natural choice' making other alternatives not even worth considering, which was nothing else but symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977:1991) relying on enchantment

rather than social consensus. It served as a basis of social distinctions (well-fitting vs inadequate) and legitimised new structures of inequality.

After twenty five years of Polish transformation, it is finally possible to have a more critical discussion on the decisions made and possible alternatives (Kieżun 2013; Bugaj 2015; Król 2015; Sowa 2015). Some of the former *Solidarność* activists who took part in the Round Table talks and then became members and advisors of post-1989 government, admit now that they were not prepared for this role. "We were too cultured, too liberal and the future seemed too obvious to us. The freedom was supposed to come, the state ruled by law, so it would be as everywhere else" (Król 2015). The imagined West was treated as a reference point, but there was a series of issues which were not even considered. There were no discussions on the role of foreign capital, the speed of changes or the scale and distribution of social costs. There was simply sociological imagination missing, even among sociologists and intellectuals, as Król (2015) admits now, and no one was able to see even an outline of the new Poland. As a result, and contrary to the expectations expressed in Polish society and abroad, Solidarity and common good did not become the basis of the new order. In fact, the notion of social justice did not appear at all as it was thought that freedom would win on its own, consistently with the neoliberal triad of freedom, opportunity and hard work. The ascent of free market and the descent of the state meant that everyone had to take care of themselves, which was promoted as a positive process of 'taking matters into one's own hands'. The mass privatisation and opening of Polish market followed, contrary to the basic rule that

weak economies should be protected. The country and its people were supposed to somehow manage. Some actually did manage very well as according to the neoliberal logic they were doomed to succeed and become the basis of the new middle class. Others, left behind without any protection, paid an extremely high price for changes.

### The Allure of Neoliberalism

“There was a man that came about almost by chance and who wasn’t stupid at all. (...) Without this character, without his iron will and his absolute conviction that he was right, nothing would have come out of it” (Król 2015). That man was Leszek Balcerowicz, the father of the ‘shock therapy’ adopted in 1989, which, if we look at it from the current perspective, was too much of a shock and not enough therapy (Shields 2008). Balcerowicz, however, was not the only one who saw nothing but the neoliberal path. The economic liberty was introduced in Poland already in 1988 by Zbigniew Messner and put into practice by Mieczysław Wilczek. Then the ‘missionaries’ arrived from abroad in the person of George Soros and then Jeffrey Sachs who simply said: neoliberalism is the only way and the *Solidarność* people forming the new government, lacking even the most fundamental economic knowledge, just believed it (cf., Kieżun 2013; Król 2015). Balcerowicz’s Plan, strongly inspired by Sachs, was quickly written and presented as ‘non-negotiable’ and ‘objectively necessary’. It implied massive liberalisation conducted with great speed and marking a radical break-through from the previous system. The social costs of it were not imagined. Even now, when it is possible

to look at those decisions from the perspective of time, there are many who defend them (Balcerowicz included) and even the critics of transformation, like Marcin Król, who admit making many mistakes out of ignorance, naivety and hurry, still perceive the ‘shock therapy’ as a ‘necessary’ tough stand since any intermediate forms of economic organisation, they claim, “didn’t exist then and don’t exist now” (Król 2015).

The allure of neoliberalism came not only from the new government’s lack of economic knowledge and persuasive or even seductive power of American advisors. In case of radical transformations and revolutions, a need to leave the previous system behind as quickly as possible is so immense that often the most attractive solutions are those offering the sharpest contrast to the old order. Polish economics, politics, and to some extent also Polish sociology, kept Marxism as an immediate reference point (Ost 2008), therefore, the elites were not seriously considering ‘mixed models’ like market socialism or welfare state associating them first of all with the negative aspects of socialism. Instead, the neoliberalism understood as a set of institutional changes reconfiguring the relationship between the state, labour and markets according to the principles of profitability, efficiency and capital accumulation, seemed to be the perfect candidate to become the antithesis of socialism. The previous ideas of egalitarianism, full employment and social protection soon were replaced by the ideas of individual freedom, equal chances, ‘necessary’ unemployment, self-reliance, and individual responsibility for success and failure. Deregulation, liberalisation of trade and investment and full pri-

vatization were suggested to be the only way of enabling Poland to function as a ‘modern’ economy and to get integrated with the global system. As in the times of the rule of Margaret Thatcher, the economics was considered to be the method, but the goal was to change the soul, which was to guarantee the success of transformation. Justifying the course of reforms taken, Leszek Balcerowicz expressed his ideas about human nature. There were strong assumptions that people, when granted freedom, are naturally self-interested and profit-maximising therefore in a non-restrictive environment they naturally compete for private gain:

The decided majority of goods (money, products, important positions, etc.) are limited, and the decided majority of people prefer their own interests (and those of their families) to those of other people. They thus would prefer that limited goods fall to them rather than others. These two facts suffice to create everyday competition in the world. (Balcerowicz 1995:72)

It was not clear, however, how the sum of individual egoisms was supposed to lead to the public good. Balcerowicz argued that lifting the state’s restrictions on property and allowing people to act in their own self-interest would create markets and benefit the whole society (cf., Dunn 2004:34). There was a slogan present in all post-socialist countries of ‘returning to Europe’ (Sztompka 1993) and by Europe, the Western part of the continent was meant. In the public discourse there existed an idealised picture of the West, ignoring the differences between the countries, which was instrumentally used in politics. People wanted to join the ideal-

ised West, a synonym of freedom, affluence, social security and all imaginable virtues and they were told that the only way is the neoliberal one, which was going to be painful, but certainly worth all the sacrifices.

During the period of highest popularity of the neoliberal perspective, there were some voices (Stark and Bruszt 2001; Kowalik 2009; 2011) warning that it can be a poor guide for policy making, but they were ignored or even ridiculed. The Polish neoliberal optics was rejecting diverse types of capitalism and foresaw one path only following the earlier stand of Margaret Thatcher that “there were no alternatives.” The economists mentioning social justice or common good were labelled as ‘provincial’ and were called the ‘dinosaurs of the Polish People’s Republic’ (Kowalik 2011). By these means, the door to social exploration was shut almost immediately after it had been opened (Stark and Bruszt 2001). Within the *Solidarność* movement, which became the basis for the new post-socialist government, there were some arguing that with the rapidly growing social inequalities (with galloping unemployment rates and growing numbers of people living below the subsistence level) the neoliberal notion of ‘equal chances’ is just an empty slogan. These voices, however, did not reach the ears of those deciding about the direction of changes (Kowalik 2009; 2011). There was a strong claim sold to society that there was no alternative, therefore all resistance would be simply irrational and illegitimate (Ost 2005). The neoliberal perspective assumed that the path to capitalism was always the same, regardless of the starting point and differences in the contexts; therefore, all the necessary changes could be introduced on the

basis of imitation of the existing solutions. For neo-liberals, the fall of socialism was a definite end of a certain period and a certain logic, and a clear triumph of the market rules. Privatisation was seen as a means of marketisation thus state-owned enterprises were transformed into shareholding or joint stock companies, whose assets were managed by a special fund or agency and prepared for sale. Privatisation was also carried out thanks to the inflow of foreign capital symbolised by “men (usually) in dark suits, armed with a different set of weapons such as downsizing, quality control and just-in-time management to restructure Polish workplaces” (Hardy 2009). Elizabeth Dunn (2004) analysed the privatisation of Alima Fruit and Vegetable Processing Company of Rzeszów taken over by Gerber and Jane Hardy (2009) observed Volvo and ABB entering the Polish market, which she compared to the arrival of *conquistadors*. No matter how arbitrary most of the decisions were, there was an ideological leitmotif of ‘normalcy’ preserved both in academic and political circles. Much of social protection has been eliminated in the name of flexibility and budgetary constraints, which was also the result of the external pressure coming from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. From the present perspective, however, it is clear that the premature and accelerated liberalisation of financial markets, the sale of banks and very quick deindustrialisation were a strategic mistake.

The introduction of market economy itself, which initially was perceived as a straightforward task of imitation, turned out to be a much more difficult task. It entailed not only a great scale privatisation

and creation of new economic institutions (such as stock markets, commercial banks, etc.) but it also required the creation of a new propertied class. It was a paradox that the reforms were being carried out in the name of the class that did not exist yet (Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998; Ost 2005). Capitalism was built for the capitalists who were about to be born. At the same time, all these changes hit mostly those who made them possible. *Solidarność*, which started as a trade union and a broad social movement of people who wanted a better life, became a political power valuing other concerns over social justice. The reforms introduced favoured technical intelligentsia occupying managerial positions. Having sound credentials as specialists at their disposal, they managed not only to preserve but also to elevate their positions. The pro-middle-class and pro-business orientation of the Solidarity governments helped significantly to prepare the grounds for the arrival of new managerial class and to make them the beneficiaries of transformation. In the course of transformation we could observe also a changing iconography. From the manual worker and freedom fighter of the 1980s to a successful businessman of the 1990s – the neoliberal symbol of freedom, reason and progress.

### Corporate Men and Women: Doing Neoliberalism or Making Do With It?

In the years 2002-2004, working first on my masters and then doctoral thesis, I was collecting autobiographical narrative interviews with people working in the business field in Poland, which had been the epicentre of neoliberal changes. I was meeting managers and CEOs working in multinationals and

in the previously state-owned and then privatised enterprises, as well as entrepreneurs running their own businesses in the south-western part of Poland (Upper, Lower and Opole Silesia). They were men and women of different age and class background who were telling me the stories of their life. The first striking thing was the role of work in their biographies, dominating over all other spheres of life. Many were not telling their life stories, but work stories. The second was the discovery of business people that the rules they apply in their professional lives cannot be used in their private lives as these are not the things they would like to teach their children. And the third thing that struck me was the level of suffering I found in the lives of those powerful and apparently very successful people. That showed me that the high costs of the neoliberal path were paid not only by the excluded ones but also by those working in the mainstream economy who, by their everyday practices, were actually doing neoliberalism.

The Polish path of post-socialist transformation, as already mentioned, was supposed to be a simple imitation of liberal economies. It was assumed that the ready-made solutions already existed, so it would suffice to copy them in order to make the Polish economy modern, efficient and competitive. It was consistent with the assumption that the neoliberal rules are not context-dependent as the ‘hard’ indicators of profitability and efficiency are unaffected by local histories and cultures. Every imitation has its limits, however, and local contexts do play their role, so the Polish economy is marked by hybridity and uneven development (cf., Shields 2008). Still, the almost perfect imitation was possible in case

of multinational corporations. Here, the logic, the policies and the practices of Polish branches were supposed to mirror those of the headquarters and other branches placed elsewhere. The same feeling of ‘higher necessity’ as we see in the dominating neoliberal discourse is also felt in the business field in general and in multinationals in particular: people often feel trapped in multiple and contradictory expectations of economic rationality, efficiency and profit maximisation, family roles (impossible to reconcile with extremely long working hours), life-long learning and constant skills upgrading with a basic need of having a meaningful life. The question I ask here is how people working in the business field (particularly in multinationals) deal biographically with the neoliberal logic brought by post-socialist transformation. What role is played by biographical work and biographical knowledge in this process? How, actually, do they do neoliberalism in their everyday practices? Or perhaps do they simply try to make do with it?

I use the concept of biographical work here in a sense of reflexive elaboration of one’s life experiences, as well as the relations between the acting self and the context of action. It is the capacity and the practice of reflecting on self in relation to the context and reflecting on context in relation to self. Biographical work may also be described as an inner activity of mind constituted by conversation with significant others and oneself (Schütze 2008), a process that is intended to establish or re-establish ultimate meaning for own existence, for everyday life situations and significant social relationships (Schütze 1992). It is a process of ‘working on’ one’s biographical experiences, which can be

translated substantively into descriptive language such as 'thinking over', 'struggling with', 'fighting out with oneself', and 'finally getting a new slant on self' (Strauss 1993:98). Such descriptive phrases sometimes unquestionably imply self-interactive work, as well as work with others, some of which is likely to involve personal and/or collective indecision, anguish, and suffering (Riemann and Schütze 1991). It is the work entailed in the process of unblocking the blocked action, and moving along into the future (Strauss 1993:52). It is concerned with how a person sees and interprets the world and defines 'reality' for himself or herself. It is based on the assumption that all have an 'interpretive self', which helps us to discover 'who one is'. This enables to construct an autobiographical story of how we came to be the person we are. This is a process of construction and reconstruction as life unfolds. Biographical work is crucial especially during turning points when one needs to go beyond the routine actions in order to deal with change. It is a mediating element between the objective structures, with their patterns and requirements, and the individual actions. It is aimed at broadening the sphere of inner-directedness and to lead to a situation where one acts as much as possible and is conditioned as little as possible (cf., Kohli 1981). The result of the lived life and biographical work is the biographical knowledge. Following Apitzsch and Siouti (2007) we can say that biographical knowledge is accumulated and symbolised in life courses of individuals and groups. On the basis of one's own experiences and the experiences of significant others and on the basis of their reflexive elaboration, we develop the knowledge that constitutes the coordinates of our orientation.

Multinational corporations entering the Polish market were welcomed with open arms as they symbolised the modern and prosperous world that politicians, economists and sociologists believed in. Piotr Sztompka was no exception here, writing: "well-organized, efficient enterprises make up islands of modernity, the exemplars of civilizational competence from which it may spread by imitation to the whole economy (...) the role of multinational corporations or joint ventures, establishing the outposts, enclaves of modern business culture in former socialist countries is hard to overestimate" (Sztompka 1993:94). It was again the imitation that was placed before Polish society as a task. The model already existed, it was assumed, and it was enough to copy it. No critical assessment and reflection were called upon, just imitation. Only later there came some awareness that multinationals may also break the law, violate workers' rights and make the life of employees and trade unions very difficult. It also became clear that some of the multinational corporations would not necessarily use the same standards in Poland as they use in the countries where they have their headquarters. For many people, however, especially those aspiring for managerial positions, multinationals became a very attractive employer. They were providing clear career ladders, high salaries and a system of bonuses, as well as possibilities of having international experience. It is not surprising then that some of the people (young university graduates, first of all) entering such organisations were becoming enchanted or even seduced by the corporate world (Każmierska, Piotrowski, and Waniek 2012).

In the social arena of multinational corporations, taking over (often in a very hostile way) privatised

Polish companies or building their branches from scratch, the process of creating a new manager started. In accordance with the logic of new economy, the language of flexibility, productivity and individual responsibility was introduced. New managers were expected to be imaginative and innovative, but in fact in their training more emphasis was put on a conformist type of behaviour (adjusting to the Western patterns) than on genuine creativity and resourcefulness (cf., Dunn 2004; Ost 2008). Going through the process of metamorphosis from the socialist *kierownik* to the capitalist *menedżer*, people were changing their beliefs, language, offices, houses, clothes, shoes, watches, haircuts, leisure activities and diets. They were becoming the new symbol of activity, mobility and modernity. Elizabeth C. Dunn describes how managers of state-owned enterprise Alima had to be transformed once the firm was taken over by American Gerber:

Gerber began by sending over a team of executives from its Fremont headquarters to 'live in' during the period of transformation and to teach Alima managers new capitalist disciplines. (...) In the marketing department, the American manager was so convinced of the importance of transforming the way Polish employees thought about business that he staffed his department with a group of young Poles and then lived in the same house with them for several months, so he could train them night and day in the habits and values of American managers, as well as in the technical aspects of marketing. (...) Gerber also sent managers from all over Alima to Gerber's headquarters in Fremont, Michigan, where they could observe the workings of a capitalist firm

firsthand. (...) Shopping trips, restaurant dinners, and visits to the homes of Gerber's managers and workers were as much a part of the curriculum as factory tours and technical training. The atmosphere was clearly one of proselytism, with strong pressure on Alima employees to convert to Gerber's way of thinking, working, and consuming. (Dunn 2004:51)

Multinationals were the agents of change in the sense that entering the Polish market they also aimed at introducing new techniques, such as aggressive marketing, audit, and quality control, as well as the rules of profit maximisation and flexibility. Not only were the enterprises forced to become more flexible but also the people working there. They both had to become 'self-regulating selves' adjusting swiftly to the changing moods of the market. The introduction of profit maximisation and flexibility rules basically meant that people had to accept job insecurity. They were expected to change their skills, manage their careers, bear risk and take responsibility even for the things beyond their control. All levels of social reality were transformed: from labour relations, through organisational practices to managers' bodies and souls.

In the following analytical part, the three cases of managers will be presented, who in the late 90s joined a privatised company that became a part of a multinational corporation. All working in the same organisational context, they represent three different ways of biographical working-out of changes, ranging from doing neoliberalism in an uncritical way through making do with neoliberalism till taking it strategically or even instrumentally.

## Marcin Zabramski<sup>1</sup>: Doing Neoliberalism Uncritically

The style of management in business changed dramatically since it had to be based first of all on the productivity and profitability indicators. Entering freshly privatised companies, many of the managers, fresh graduates of new economics, as well as all other disciplines (from philosophy and social sciences, through law and administration to engineering and mathematics), had a feeling that the post-socialist firms were so inefficient that “the costs could be cut with an axe there,” as one of the interviewed managers put it. They often treated the former state-owned companies as an experiment ground, where spectacular results could be achieved by applying principles of flexibility and profit maximisation. In order to improve the financial standing of the companies, the restructuring was initiated, which involved very high human costs in the form of mass layoffs. In the process of performing all the ‘necessary’ tasks of ‘modernisation’, the figure of a ‘new manager’ was made. Marcin Zabramski, who entered a socialist enterprise just after it was privatised in one of the most common ways – taken over by a multinational corporation producing very similar products as those produced before by the socialist plant, provides a good illustration of this process:

At the beginning, they proposed to me the position of a procurement specialist and after four months I managed to get promoted and I became a procurement manager. And I started the restructuring of the

whole department, which turned out perhaps more cheerfully [*bardziej wesoło*] for me than for the employees, who’d been working in this department. The location was changed, as well as 100% of personnel. The restructuring has continued until now with good results. The productivity has increased. The work efficiency has increased several times in comparison to the level of four years ago. The workload has increased as well. [...] It was an outdated [*przestarzały*] team, the people at the age of my parents. The team and I, we couldn’t understand each other at all. The team had different goals than the ones I had.

Everything was apparently new here. The logic was new, the company had to be transformed according to the new rules and Marcin was a new man capable of doing so. He does not reflect on the meaning of the new practices. Privatisation and restructuring are taken for granted by him as the means leading to the goal of efficient management and improved performance. Marcin Zabramski is an example of a young manager who went through an accelerated course of neoliberal economics, where efficiency and profit maximisation are the main rules. The story of laying off the whole team is important here as Marcin tells us straight away, at the beginning of his narrative, after a few synthetic phrases summing up his educational path and beginning of work. Told in a nonchalant or even objectifying language, this story plays a role of a statement here. It defines who Marcin is (the proponent of the new economy) and who ‘others’ are (‘backward and incompatible’). This new logic is biographically significant for Marcin as it can be used as an identity statement. When I met him in 2002 in his new job in a big city, he was 28 years old. It was his first employment after uni-

versity graduation and it seemed that for the first time he had a chance to encounter something tangible in his life - a paved way to success. His youth in a small town is marked by disorientation. After graduating a secondary school of biology-chemistry profile (potentially leading to a prestigious medical career) and having some artistic ambitions (Marcin describes himself as a humanist) he decides to enrol in a military academy. This unexpected choice is explained by his wish to “relieve his parents from the costs of his maintenance.” He describes his family as intelligentsia (father works as an engineer and mother is professionally inactive). He does not mention their economic status, but we realise there are some constraints. When the idea with the military academy does not work out (entrance exams “minimally” failed), Marcin decides to study Law and Administration in the extramural system (during weekends) enabling him to take up work in order to cover his costs of living. Initially he has no interest in law. Taking this direction is described as a pure accident (as Marcin simply follows one of his friends), but it also seems to be another choice dictated by his desire for a prestigious career. As he declares, he has “always had an ambition to do something going beyond the norm,” making a distinction between him and those who never left the small town where he was born and raised and “now have a very grey life.” His whole narrative is led by the rules of a status game. The schools he attends are “best in town,” the year-long scholarship he wins at one of the UK universities, after the fourth year of his studies in Poland, he calls “a scientific internship” (*staż naukowy*). The constraint to work he calls “fun” (*zabawa*). During his university years, he goes abroad “playing as a shop-assistant, a farm-

er or a small smuggler.” When he has a chance to move from extramural to full-time studying, he also moves from a small town to a large city, where, for the first time, he is confronted with an individualistic approach (“everybody for himself”). During his stay in the UK, “a bit out of boredom, a bit to test himself,” Marcin starts looking for a job. He prepares a list of multinational companies operating in Poland and contacts all of them. He goes to a few job interviews, among others in the company where he is currently employed. He is proud that he was one of the three candidates selected out of 600 applying, and invited for an induction course. There, in a small town outside London, in a group of thirty newly employed young people, Marcin goes through the crash course in the new economy and corporate work. His intensive training continues in Poland, where he acts as the subject and the object of accelerated changes:

In three months I got promoted to the role of a manager and in four months the old team was gone. And I started building the new department, moving the whole logistics to the new place, which was going hand-in-hand with the recruitment process. So, the person who eight months before had gone through the recruitment, now had the right to recruit on his own. Lots of fun, two hundred people sieved through my hands.

The satisfaction of sitting on the other side of the table is certainly related to power relations, but also to the feeling of belonging. Becoming a modern corporate man, Marcin belongs to a new world and having shaped himself in order to fit, he has a chance now to mould the others. He does not simply follow the

<sup>1</sup> The names of all interviewees have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.

dominating logic, he is doing neoliberalism. Marcin has a ready-made narrative about his employment, his quick promotion to a managerial position, his role in the restructuring process, laying off the 'old' and recruiting the 'new' people in 'his' department. The language Marcin uses is impersonal, technical even and his way of narrating resembles ticking boxes of 'goals', 'personnel composition', 'productivity' and 'efficiency'. The fact that Marcin had a ready-made scenario for telling his story became apparent when during our first meeting there were some technical problems with recording and we had to interrupt the interview and make another appointment. When we met again and started the interview from the very beginning, Marcin was telling exactly the same story, using the same language and structure. Even the jokes and anecdotes he was telling were the same and they appeared exactly in the same moments. That was a well rehearsed narrative Marcin had a chance to tell many times before. After switching off the recorder he kept talking, telling

me about his practices at work and his strategies of quick promotion. Due to ethical considerations, the off-record material has not been cited in any publications, but it has been used in the process of case interpretation. The narratives of Marcin during and after the recording are consistent as if the switching off of the recorder did not mark for him the end of performance. It shows his work rewards him not only materially but also existentially, giving him an identity, a way of life and a sense of being. He does not question the corporate logic and practices, on the contrary, he takes them for granted and focuses only on the development of his skills in order to fit this logic even better as he knows that a good fit is going to be rewarded.

As so many other 'new men' in managerial positions (cf., Dunn 2004), Marcin Zabramski was deciding which employees were capable of adapting to the new conditions and which were not, according to the following dichotomies:

|   |    |   |
|---|----|---|
| new economy   | vs | socialism   |
| international business                                | vs | state-owned enterprises                                     |
| profit maximisation                                   | vs | plan execution  |
| modernity, civilisation                               | vs | backwardness (resistance to change, mental incompatibility) |
| dynamism, mobility, hyper-activity                    | vs | passivity, inertia  |
| flexibility   | vs | rigidity  |
| youth   | vs | age   |
| self-reliance, responsibility                         | vs | dependence, attitude of claims ( <i>roszczeniowość</i> )    |
| individualism   | vs | collectivism  |
| impersonal relations based on calculation, networking | vs | personalised connections                                    |
| strong career drive, need to achieve                  | vs | stability of employment, anchoring                          |
| risk taking   | vs | risk avoidance  |
| constant skill upgrading (importance of certificates) | vs | outdated knowledge  |

Marcin was given a team of people representing, according to him and according to the binary neoliberal logic, all the qualities of the right side of the column (often called, even by sociologists, as the attributes of 'socialist mentality', 'socialist heritage' or even *homo sovieticus*) therefore, according to the new market logic that was also his own logic, he had 'no other choice' than to dismiss them all. Their assumed 'age', 'backwardness', 'dependence' and their goals, so different from his own, made their collaboration impossible. In fact, there was no time to verify these assumptions as the decision about dismissals had been taken before the work together even began. This was a purely ideological move.

The decisions of who would be fired from freshly privatised companies were made on the basis of a simple check: are the qualities of the left or the right column dominating? Those who could not stay were judged as having a 'socialist mentality' or simply a 'wrong attitude'. In fact, these were not skills and experience, which played a crucial role here, but the 'inner characteristics' and 'right personality' (cf., Dunn 2004). The 'right personality' had to be demonstrated, therefore all the changes in language, dress, possessions and lifestyle played such a crucial role. Again, it was a question of transforming body and soul. In this process there were also the media, which came with help. There were constantly showing the assumed Western business culture, with its work, leisure and consumption practices, treated as a pattern that should be copied in the 'new' Poland. By adopting those practices Polish corporate men signalled their desire for membership in the imagined community of international business. The same aspi-

ration is clearly visible in Marcin's narrative. His engagement in the building of a new department based on the new rules and the new management style, his efforts of cutting the costs and "fighting with excessive consumption," and his participation in "countless training courses in every possible field," were appreciated and rewarded with an invitation to join the company's international body responsible for its procurement policy "in the whole world." Every two years Marcin participates in the meetings of the group of procurement managers responsible for different locations, discussing new "global" projects and comparing the results. He travels to other continents, which symbolises his access to international business. This is his main positive reference point, the environment he wants to be identified with. The negative point of reference is all those having the traits of the right column, his family and former friends included, which shows that those simplified divisions were not limited to the sphere of work and functioned also as the axis structuring family relations:

[my] father was a person very much rooted in the previous system... in previous Poland. I consider myself already to be a person of a completely different generation, with no complexes at all towards the colleagues from... working in our company. I see no difference, I'm not ashamed of anything and without problems I can compete in any field. While my father, unfortunately, in the 90s started losing ground under his feet and we didn't agree on many things.

According to the same logic, the alliances are built, where the support for the 'new' and opposition towards the 'old' are extended and strengthened:

I have a brother who I try to help financially or by showing him the way he should choose in his life and suggesting some things, starting from the choice of faculty and finishing with the choice of future career.

New corporate men and women in Poland were made according to the imagined pattern of modern, civilised, young, self-confident, well-dressed, fit and flexible individuals. Free-floating characters capable of shaping and reshaping themselves as they were supposed to be free of 'socialist heritage' and unconstrained by their family or milieu of origin norms and expectations. Liberated from complex social relationships they could follow the impersonal logic of the market. The new men and women needed new reference groups and new leisure circles. Marcin, living for three years in a large city, does not have a group of friends or acquaintances. He does not visit his place of origin very often and his social contacts are limited to his younger brother and colleagues from work. Beside the abstract international business, in his narrative there are no collective references. He hopes for some new contacts as he has just bought a new flat "in the environment of very young people who probably have similar... interests and jobs similar to mine." While Marcin represents the features of many young managers entering the corporate world from the beginning of the 1990s, this picture alone would be too simplistic. As some managers were complying entirely with the new rules, actually doing the neoliberal path and being rewarded with promotions and bonuses, others managed to contest, negotiate and reinterpret the logic sown by the proponents of neoliberal market. Not being able to change the organisational contact, they were leaving multinational corporations. And

if staying, they were looking for the peaceful niches enabling some degree of freedom. In this way, they were not doing neoliberalism. They were merely making do with it.

### Paweł Woźniak: Making Do With Neoliberalism

In the same company where I interviewed Marcin Zabramski, a multinational corporation operating in the energy sector, I had a chance to meet Paweł Woźniak as well. In fact, after the interview with Marcin I asked him if he could introduce me to some of his colleagues. He chose Paweł and he did it as a joke. He said: "If you want to interview more people who make careers, you need to talk to this guy" and he laughed. Marcin considered Paweł (just seven years older) as his complete antithesis as according to his own definition, Paweł was not as ambitious and as career-driven and in consequence not as successful as himself. The interview with Paweł Woźniak showed that indeed, he was much less enchanted with the corporate world (Każmierska et al. 2012) and less driven by the logic of productivity and profit maximisation. He was mainly focused on his engineering work, keeping distance from the pressure of climbing the corporate ladder:

To be honest, I don't feel drawn to it. I'm not dreaming of becoming a CEO [*prezes*] or something. But, maybe there's something like fear not to be left behind. So, like a donkey one pulls it, without knowing what for, just not to be left out-of-the-way. I've been here for a few years, I don't know other companies, and I see that if somebody's not in the mainstream, then sooner

or later, in one way or another he drops out, leaves... in short, disappears. Probably in other places it's the same. (...) So, trying not to lose touch... Maybe it's just appearance, the things I do outside, trying to show that I do care about something, climb up and so on. No, I don't really see myself as a director who fires people, for example. No, I wouldn't be able to do it. To be the one who demands work after hours, for free, because extra hours are rarely paid. Well, but if it's needed, I'll worry then. For now, fortunately, I don't need to worry, I'm fine like this, we'll see what the future brings. One used to dream to go somewhere further, not necessarily higher, but further [*phone ringing*] now, I rather dream to stay in the company, to keep my job.

Paweł recognises the dominating logic in the corporate world very well. He is aware that contesting it or refusing to take part in the corporate race, one faces a high risk of being excluded. Running is really a condition of corporate existence as again there is the dichotomy of previous passivity and stagnation and current need for dynamism, movement and hyper-activity. His strategy to survive is to do his engineering job well, to work in the niche he is responsible for, but at the same time to keep close to the mainstream, to protect himself (refusing working over time if it is not an emergency) and to keep his standards high. He makes do with the neoliberal logic by keeping a distance and this is exactly this distance that enables him to reflect upon the rules of corporate world and establish the relations between the context, his actions and himself.

Beside the apparent contrasts between Paweł and Marcin, there are also some similarities between

them. They both have fathers who are engineers and mothers who work at home. Each of them has one sibling. They both follow a standard path of education and felt disoriented at the time of graduating secondary school. At this point, however, appears a major difference in their biographical paths. As Marcin simply follows his friend and starts studying Law, Paweł fails one of his A-levels (which he does not present as a failure) and while attending a post-secondary school not of much significance for him, he takes a year to think his life over. This is his moratorium period helping him to decide which direction to take. He is interested in architecture, but being, at the same time, pushed by his family towards more pragmatic solutions (presumably giving better employment opportunities), he chooses Mechanical Engineering. The turning point in his educational career (similarly to Marcin) is his scholarship in Germany where he "catches the wind in his sails." When he comes back to Poland to finish his MSc degree, he sees a job advert in the newspaper, he sends an application and he is offered the job. It is the same multinational where he works at the time of the interview. His narrative style is very different from the one of Marcin. Paweł does not try to impress. He tells the story of his employment and promotion to the managerial position in a matter-of-fact manner and instead of seriousness, a status game and a success story (as in the case of Marcin), there is some amusement and surprise felt. The main difference, however, between these two young managers can be described by biographical work and biographical knowledge. Paweł is much more reflexive as he never lost the distance between his life projects and the organisation he works for.

Keeping this distance, he reflects (works biographically) on his experiences, the company's logic and the relations between himself and the context of his actions. Marcin, on the other hand, merged with the organisational context to the extent that the company and him have become one. The goals, interests, strategies and practices of the company have been internalised becoming his own. Paweł, thanks to his reflexivity (and contrary to Marcin), has never been seduced by the corporate world and this perspective was additionally strengthened by the experiences of his wife:

She used to have... a view... like many young people: I'll make it, I'll get a job, make a career... Now, not any more. It's not only because of me because she was going through such things.. it cured her. For example she was a boss in a company and it turned out that this company went bankrupt, so she had to fire people herself. They were Germans, the owners of this company, and these Germans failed to comply with payments, it wasn't their fault, they just went bankrupt.

The experiences of bankruptcy and the layoffs that followed happening so close to Paweł reinforced his idea that the new market reality in general and corporate reality in particular bring high risks individuals like he and his wife need to deal with. On the basis of reflection on his own experiences and those of his wife, he has developed a different understanding of corporate reality, which can be described as biographical knowledge constituting the coordinates of his orientation (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007). In the previous passage he admits he used to dream to go far, not necessarily in the sense of high

positions but rather as a chance for development and self-realisation. Now, his ambitions have been reduced to the level of maintaining the job he already has. Anchoring in his niche seems to him the best strategy of dealing with the unpredictability of the neoliberal market.

The different approaches of Marcin and Paweł are the result of their different biographical experiences, different levels of biographical work and biographical knowledge, as well as their different professional standing. Marcin Zabramski studied Law and Administration and to become a manager he went through some courses abroad, where the company's headquarters are based, and on job training. Paweł Woźniak, on the other hand, is an engineer monitoring the condition of equipment and calling himself "the machines' doctor" (*lekarz maszyn*). Their dissimilarity can be also analysed in terms of differences between people working in corporate management and traditional professions (cf., Kaźmierska et al. 2012). As Paweł with his strong engineering background, despite his fear, may find a job outside the corporate world relatively easily, it does not have to be the case of Marcin. Feeling that his skills could be more context-specific and not having negative experiences in the corporate world, Marcin still in 2002 stayed enchanted, shaping his actions according to the neoliberal rules of productivity and profit maximisation.

As in the case of Marcin, there is the experience of intergenerational conflict related to different definitions of past and present systems, in the case of Paweł we see the intergenerational transmission. Here, father and son are both mechanical engineers

and identify more with the work they do than the positions they occupy. Two important dimensions of intergenerational transmission here are the professionalisation (the value of being competent) and work ethos (the value of hard and honest work):

[My] Father worked a lot, for many years in different mines (...) and in Hungary he was a manager [*kierownik*], I don't remember exactly. So, he always worked in his profession. And I have a great respect for [my] father because he really was a man who worked his whole life honestly. He was never making any agreements [*układy*], any tripping, that's absolutely not him. He was always competent. Even working.. in the Mining Office he did a doctorate, just like this! (...) He also worked very hard. And even today, being retired, something I'd never expected, he started a business, with very good results. And when I see how he writes plans, business plans, right? Marketings, things, I'm shocked because I'd never manage, as well as he does. I'm saying it quietly because officially I'd manage very well. So that here I can say... I value him very much because of this.

Even though in the neoliberal discourse the figures of socialist *kierownik* and new *menedżer* are juxtaposed, in the narrative of Paweł, they are not treated as contrastive. On the contrary, the binary logic of left and right columns turns out to be entirely inadequate for the description of reality. Paweł's father, the socialist *kierownik*, has many features of the left column (like flexibility, life-long learning and risk-taking) whereas Paweł himself, the supposedly neoliberal, modern *menedżer*, lacks them. He does recognise very well the arbitrariness of those distinctions and plays with the convention. He knows

what the expectations are towards him and officially he complies with them. What he really thinks and does, is a different story.

### Agnieszka Wrońska: Neoliberalism Taken Strategically

In order to make the picture even more complex, let me introduce a third person I interviewed in the same multinational. A 36-year-old woman, Agnieszka Wrońska, a mother of two young daughters. Keeping the organisational context unchanged, we can see clearly the role of biographical experiences, biographical work and biographical knowledge for the negotiation, contestation, instrumentalisation or uncritical acceptance of the neoliberal discourse.

Agnieszka, similarly to Marcin and Paweł, ended up in a multinational as her other life projects did not work out and the corporate world promised a well-structured, predictable and relatively affluent life. Agnieszka's dream has always been singing. It seemed, however, so impractical that she did not have the courage even to try this path. Instead, she graduates a secondary school of the biology-chemistry profile (like Marcin) and after graduating it she feels so disoriented that she decides to take a year off in order to think over (like Paweł) what she really wanted to do next. During the gap year she is pushed by her parents (father is a carpenter and mother an office worker) to get a paid job. She starts working in a hospital (as it gives preferential points at the university entrance exams) and after a year, following her friend, Agnieszka takes up Physiotherapy studies in a college. After graduation she works in hospital as a physiotherapist, but

her dream of the Academy of Music was still there. Unable to fight it anymore, Agnieszka takes the entrance exams to study at the Vocal Faculty. At this point starts a background construction, nested in her main narrative, where she tells with tiniest details about her entrance exams and so much looked forward to Vocal studies. This path is interrupted, however, by very painful experiences of a serious illness and death of her mother, which was then followed by the birth of Agnieszka's first child. Here, the background construction finishes as she goes back to her main narrative line: the dream of singing was over. She becomes a full time mother and two years later, she gives birth to her second daughter:

Children are such a part of life that determines especially women, I think, to make the effort.. I need to admit that I'm not a typical woman who can fulfil herself at home. I wouldn't be able.. I love my children very much and whenever I can spend some... (...) time, it's all theirs, for studying, for playing together. But, I just can't be with them at home. Well, I mean, it's not that I can't stay at home, I can't play this one role only. I was, I took five years of maternal leave. So, it wasn't that I left.. gave birth and went away. And I thought it was the perfect age for them to join their peers and I should go back to work. In sum I devoted to my children five years of staying with them every day and bringing them up. And then I decided that I just couldn't do it any more. I couldn't, psychologically I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to go to work because I couldn't cope. I was so exhausted, so impoverished psychologically that...

Agnieszka goes back to her work in hospital knowing perfectly well that she needed a career change

as she did not see any chance for development in a "fossilised and highly hierarchical environment." She starts extramural Management studies at the Polytechnic and soon after is offered a job as an administrator in a multinational company (the same where Marcin and Paweł work). Agnieszka starts with great enthusiasm as she sees the new job as a chance for development and learning new things. Working full time during the week and studying during the weekends, she needs to re-organise the family life. Her daughters, who are 4 and 6 at that time, are taken care of by Agnieszka's sister who was then unemployed. The two of them also share housework (the role of Agnieszka's husband in the domestic job division was not mentioned). Soon it becomes clear, however, that the style of work required in the corporate world (including ongoing training and travels), is not sustainable. Weighing the possibilities of development and professional fulfilment on the one hand, and paying very high biographical costs on the other, Agnieszka faces a fundamental question: is it worth it?

From the morning till night, in fact, I'm away. My children don't see me, practically, sometimes it happens that I go for a business trip and then I've got classes [at Polytechnic] and they don't see me for a week. (...) When I come and see my child sleeping with a photo of me... it's just terribly sad. Really. I've been thinking, many times, if it's worth it.

The experience of role overload and conflict, together with the tensions between the company's requirements and her own identity and life projects, has led Agnieszka to intense biographical work. She reflects on the dominating style of corporate work,

the costs paid by her and her family and looks for the ways out. What is typical, however, is her way of reasoning. Agnieszka, similarly to many other men and women working in multinational corporations, interviewed in this project, does not even think about changes, which could be introduced on the level of the organisation. Instead, she tries to mould herself to fit, to accumulate as much cultural, social and economic capital as possible in her current job and then to leave:

Ultimately, although I know it's not a good moment now, I'd just like to run my own business. I'd like to manage it in such a style that would be the most rational for me. Learning from mistakes, drawing conclusions, building a good climate in a team. I'd love it, I've always wanted it.

When compared to Marcin and Paweł, the case of Agnieszka is very interesting as it represents a different strategy of dealing with the neoliberal rules of the corporate world. As Marcin takes them uncritically and Paweł accepts them only outwardly, Agnieszka treats them instrumentally. The rule of constant skill upgrading works well for her life project as her current employer pays her university fees and the cultural capital she accumulates now (in the form of knowledge and recognised certificates) will be useful in her next job. The rules of dynamism, mobility and networking helps Agnieszka to gather social capital equally useful for her professional future. And the training she undergoes now in flexibility and risk-taking may be important in her entrepreneurial scenario. There are some doubts, however, if the strategy of changing a corporate career into an entrepreneurial one may bring the de-

sired work-life balance. The interviews conducted with male and female entrepreneurs show that their working time and stress levels are comparable if not higher with those of corporate managers. In order to avoid this trap, Agnieszka will have to invest more in doing biographical work.

The differences in biographical experiences, biographical work and biographical knowledge between these three managers are also visible on the level of their style of narration and self-presentation. As Marcin feels very comfortable during the interview, self-confident, seemingly laid back and participating in a status game, Paweł feels nervous and does not try to impress. As Marcin seems to have a ready script of his professional biography that he acts out, the narrative of Paweł is often interrupted by "I don't know what else to say, I've never talked about myself." Those differences may come also from the fact that Marcin considers himself a good speaker and Paweł stutters a little bit. Agnieszka is still a different case as she is neither over-confident nor shy. Her narrative is the longest of all, most detailed, most complex. Recounting the death of her mother and the impossibility of giving more time to her children, she cries quietly.

The narrative of Marcin does not suggest the ongoing reflective elaboration of his past experiences or the critical reflection about the context of his actions and the relations between him and the context. Being comfortably placed in the mainstream of corporate life, he has internalised the company's logic and treats it as his own. As long as there are no tensions between his own career project and the company's opportunity structure, he does not problematise the

relations between them. Paweł, on the other hand, with his desire for a peaceful life, constantly experiences the tensions between himself and the context, which stimulates him to reflect on his life, his place, his career and his plans. His desire for a quiet life does not make him passive as the mere fact of keeping his job requires complex arrangements, negotiations and constant checking if his position gets closer to the mainstream or to the margins. The biographical knowledge accumulated by them and constituting the coordinates of orientation for their lives also differs. Paweł has learnt on the basis of his wife's experiences, adapting his life and career plans accordingly. Marcin is still at the point where Paweł's wife was before the company's bankruptcy: all the qualities of the left column embodied and no tensions felt yet. Agnieszka finds herself between a rock and a hard place, which constantly stimulates her biographical work. There are still many unresolved issues in her life, which she is aware of and which she tries to tackle. She does not seem to realise one thing, however, that the corporate style of work can be negotiated. She recognises the need for flexibility, but she applies it only for her biography, not the organisation she works for. She makes do with the neoliberal reality on the basis of her resources, biographical work and biographical knowledge, trying to increase the profits and reduce the damages, but without questioning its logic.

## Conclusions

In Poland, a country with little liberal tradition, after the fall of real socialism, liberalism (or neoliberalism) was on the lips of all. Jerzy Szacki, paraphrasing Marx and Engels, wrote in 1994: "A spectre

is haunting Eastern Europe - that spectre of liberalism" (Szacki 1995:1). What was often meant was liberalism in its 'pure' form, long forgotten in the West (Szacki 1995) or neoliberalism of American republicans, where capitalism for the poor is combined with socialism for the rich (Moskalewicz 2014). The introduction of the neoliberal rules, stressing the importance of freedom, opportunity and hard work, significantly favoured business people facilitating their accumulation of capital and designating them as the basis of the new middle class in Poland. In a special way the managers working in multinational corporations were to embody the neoliberal persona: self-interested, profit-maximising, flexible, individualistic and instrumentally rational. The neoliberal project except triggering the changes on all levels of social reality, from labour relations to body and soul, brought also numerous contradictions. It was discovered that the new style of work makes it impossible to be at the same time a good employee and a good parent, as time resources needed for both roles are simply insufficient, and that the practices commonly applied at work, leading to economic efficiency and profit maximisation, are not necessarily the ones people would like to see in their private lives. In order to deal with these contradictions, the new managers had to develop certain strategies in order to make their lives fairly consistent and acceptable. As some became devoted proponents of the new economy, acting instrumentally and actively strengthening the course of changes, actually doing neoliberalism; others maintained a critical distance, trying to make do with neoliberalism by finding a peaceful niche in corporate structures; others still became skilful players, thinking strategically and well, recognising

the new opportunities and constraints, neither idealising nor demonising them, but simply trying to make the most of them.

The analysis of these three biographical cases, representing different ways of coping with the new order introduced by the post-socialist transformation, has demonstrated how neoliberalism was actually done. People of different social and educational backgrounds were entering the business field, where they were learning by doing and through their practices shaping the new context of action. Multinational corporations played a special role here. With their seductive power, they attracted many who dreamed of doing 'something important'. The definitions of 'the important' differed significantly. As some were lured by the opportunity of climbing the corporate ladder and joining the club of international business (mainly interested in the external signs of success and high status), others, immune to the status game, aimed at a relatively stable employment and financial security giving them a peace of mind. Still for others, multinationals were a substitute for their interrupted careers

and ambitions unfulfilled elsewhere. They were all pushed towards the corporate world by a common belief (expressed by their families and shared by them) that it provided an opportunity for stable employment and predictable careers. The multinationals entering Poland seemed too big and too powerful to fail and only the later experiences of dismissals due to mergers, bankruptcies or cost cutting showed that the stability and predictability of multinational corporations was illusory. The analysis has shown that thanks to biographical work and biographical knowledge, it is possible to keep distance to the corporate world in order to monitor the relations between the acting self and the context of action, one's own life projects and the opportunity structure provided. However, it has been also demonstrated how limited the space for change is. Even those who have important biographical resources of reflexivity and knowledge at their disposal, do not necessarily engage in the reflection on organisational change. And as long as change remains unthinkable, it will not happen and the corporate neoliberal world will remain unchallenged.

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## Biographiczne doświadczenia transformacji postsocjalistycznej w korporacjach. Tworzenie neoliberalnej ścieżki

**Abstrakt:** Porządek neoliberalny, wprowadzony w Polsce w procesie postsocjalistycznej transformacji, stanowił kontekst działania oraz repertuar zasad i praktyk, z którymi nowi korporacyjni menadżerowie musieli się zmierzyć. O ile część z nich traktowała ten nowy porządek jako „oczywisty” i będący „jedyną” drogą pozwalającą dołączyć do grona gospodarek wyidealizowanego Zachodu i przez swoje codzienne praktyki nakierowane na efektywność i maksymalizację zysku w istocie tworzyła neoliberalizm, inni, zachowując dystans do nowego świata „wolności i możliwości”, zdołali wypracować bardziej krytyczne stanowisko. Ci drudzy więc nie tworzyli aktywnie neoliberalizmu, lecz uczyli się z nim żyć, podchodząc do niego strategicznie lub nawet instrumentalnie. W artykule tym wyeksponowana zostaje rola pracy biograficznej i wiedzy biograficznej w procesie dystansowania się, który umożliwia monitorowanie i negocjowanie relacji pomiędzy działającym podmiotem a neoliberalnym kontekstem działania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** postsocjalistyczna transformacja, biografia, praca biograficzna, neoliberalizm, korporacje